



THE ARC, AAIDD, AUCD,
UCP, NACDD AND SABE

FACT SHEET

MODERNIZATION OF DISABILITY TERMINOLOGY

Background

Over the past several decades, the field of disability has experienced numerous changes, including the identification of new disabilities, new civil rights protections, a growing self advocacy movement and a shift in how society views disability. Within the field of intellectual disabilities, there has occurred a gradual shift in the terminology to define this population. The terms “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” have been replaced in many arenas with the terms “intellectual disability” and “intellectually disabled”. Unfortunately, common usage of the terms “retarded” and “retard” are heard in everyday language and the media, including popular movies. People with intellectual disabilities and their families are insulted and offended by such actions.

Professional and advocacy organizations working on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities have changed the names of their organizations. Many states have or are in the process of changing state laws and the names of state agencies that serve this constituency.

Many federal laws require that applicants for services, benefits and rights are identified as having a particular disability. Most of these laws require a label of “mental retardation” to establish eligibility.

Action Taken by Congress and the Administration

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) introduced S.2781, named Rosa’s Law. This bill now has 38 bipartisan co-sponsors. Representative Michael McMahon (D-NY) introduced H.R.4544. It is named the Elizabeth A. Connelly Act. This bill now has 2 co-sponsors. The bills are virtually identical. Both bills would change the terms “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” to “intellectual disability” and “intellectually disabled” in laws primarily related to education, employment and other social services. The legislation would not affect in any way eligibility or services under the programs within the reach of the bill.

Recommendations

Disability advocates, particularly self advocates with intellectual disabilities, and their families strongly desire that the terms “mental retardation” and “mentally retarded” be replaced in federal laws. They urge all Members of Congress to co-sponsor this legislation so that it could become law this year. They also urge the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee (HELP) and the House Education and Labor Committee to move the bills to the House and Senate floors for a final vote.

Relevant Committees

Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
House Education and Labor Committee

For more information, please contact The Arc and United Cerebral Palsy Disability Policy Collaboration (202) 783-2229, Association of University Centers on Disability (301) 588-8252, American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (202) 387-1968, National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities (202) 506-5813 or the Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (802) 760-8856.

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